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ON THE

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AN AMERICAN LESSON

By WILLIAM H. HOLMES

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ON THE EVOLUTION OF ORNAMENT—AN AMERICAN LESSON.

BY W. H. HOLMES.

Much has been written upon that ever fascinating topic—the evolution of ornament. All find within this theme the touch of nature that makes the whole world kin. The artistic sense is in some degree developed in the minds of all men, and through its intuitive and constant exercise art has become a rival of nature in the realm of the beautiful—a realm not more fascinating to the devotee of pure æsthetic pleasure than to the earnest but prosaic student of the evolution of culture.

America's lesson concerning this subject has never yet been given that full and careful consideration its importance demands, although that lesson is inscribed in lucid language upon every page of the native record. Of virile and spontaneous growth the art of embellishment in America furnishes many evidences of the correct eye, the facile hand, and the true æsthetic instinct of the native races.

It is impossible to trace back the idea of embellishment to its inception, for the presumption is that it came up from the shadows of the pre-human stage of our existence. It was probably first exercised upon man's own person, but later extended to those objects with which, from generation to generation, he had most constantly and intimately to deal. In the early stages of culture its exercise is not wholly an intellectual, but rather what I prefer to call an instinctive act, and under favorable conditions it so remains far into the stage of culture known as civilization; it does not cease to be measurably unerring in its action until intellect essays to perform the work of instinct—until men begin to think out results instead of feeling them out. The period that sees the full and free exercise of purely intellectual methods witnesses the end of ornament as a living growth. It is afterwards not a unit, a simple thing, a growth, but a composite thing, the parts of which can by no possibility come into full harmony with one another, for their relationship, one to the other and each to all, depends not upon spontaneous or instinctive impulses of the mind, but upon individual judgment, fallible and uncertain even in the most enlightened minds of this enlightened age.

It is impossible to determine how far beyond the stage of æsthetic evolution, here referred to as instinctive, native American decorative art had advanced at the period of foreign invasion. A nation pursuing the normal course of progress, free from intrusion of ideas from distinct peoples or from higher planes of culture, long follows the lead of instinctive promptings and habitual methods in all decorative elaboration; with such a nation the elements of ornament are not independent or abstract conceptions transferable at will from art to art; they are essentially concrete, each art employing in its enhancement only those motives or elements that arise within the art, or that come to it from without for other reasons than those of mere embellishment.

It is within the limits of this primitive or elementary period that we may best begin the study of the evolution of ornament, for here the phenomena are homogeneous and the processes simple.

In this paper I desire to call attention to that portion of the æsthetic field which pertains to the surface embellishment of the handiwork of man, and more especially to certain set or conventional forms of decoration that, in advanced cultures, through obscure processes of abstraction and transfer, have been adopted into many branches of art and by many peoples. Such are the herring-bone, the cheveron, the guilloche, the meander, the fret, and the scroll.

Names of [illegible]
line decoration

In America two arts are particularly concerned in the early stages of the evolution of these designs, namely, the textile and the fictile arts. By many writers architecture has been given an important and probably a false place in its relation to the evolution of such decorative motives, since many of our aborigines employ almost every form of typical decorative figure in the two first named arts at a culture period long anterior to that at which the native architecture received the first touches from æsthetic fingers.

Forms
Geometric and
non Geometric

The elements of ornament utilized in these arts are, in genesis and in character, of two well-defined classes. Those of one class arise within these or cognate arts, and being of mechanical origin are wholly geometric. Those of the other class are derived from nature, and being delineative are primarily non-geometric, but the geometric elements, especially in the textile—the antecedent art so far as decoration is concerned—are first in the field and constitute the beginnings, the first steps of decoration. Delineative subjects primarily have an ideographic office and when finally introduced into art as pure decorations serve to supplement, to modify, and to enlarge the realm of the geometric.

When these elements are once taken up by the embellishing faculty they are subjected to the action of two great forces, namely, the mechanical forces of the particular art to which they belong, or into which they are introduced, and the æsthetic forces of the human mind; and it is the combined effect of these forces acting within each art and upon each motive that finally produces the results which we here desire to consider.

All mechanical elements yield readily to the action of these forces and to all the changing requirements and conditions of art. Imitative features yield somewhat less readily to the same agencies, but they are gradually forced into unreal shapes by technical restrictions and in the end assume a geometric character no less pronounced than the technically born elements.

There arise here two questions: First, How do the technical elements inherent in the art develop into certain definite and highly constituted forms? and, second, What part do delineative or nature-derived elements take in producing or shaping corresponding results?

The desires of the mind constitute the motive power, the force that induces all progress in art; the appreciation of embellishment and the desire to elaborate it are the cause of all progress in purely decorative evolution. It appears, however, that there is in the mind no preconceived idea of what that elaboration should be; the mind is a growing thing and pushes forward along the lines laid out by environment. Seeking in art æsthetic gratification, it follows the lead of technique along the channels opened by such of the useful arts as offer suggestions of embellishment. The results reached vary with the particular art and are important in direct proportion to the facilities furnished by it. In this respect the textile art possesses vast advantage over all other arts, as it is first in the field, is of widest application, is full of suggestions of embellishment, and is inexorably fixed in its methods of expression. The mind in its primitive, mobile condition is as clay in the grasp of such forces.

In considering the first question, how do the mechanical elements of ornament develop into highly constituted forms? a close analysis of the forces and suggestions inherent in the arts is necessary. It will be observed that order, uniformity and symmetry are among the first lessons of the arts, and especially of the textile art. From the very beginning the workman finds it necessary to direct his attention to these considerations in the preparation of his materials as well as in the construction of his utensils. If parts employed are multiple they must be uniform, and to reach definite results, either in form or ornament, there must be constant counting of numbers and adjusting of spaces. The most fundamental and constant elements embodied in the textile art and available for the expression of embellishment are the minute steps of the intersections or bindings which express themselves to the eye both by relief and color. These elements exist fortuitously and without design on the part of the artist. Now, the most necessary and constant combination of these elements is in continuous lines or in rows of more or less isolated figures; the most necessary and constant arrangement of these combinations is in lines following the web and the woof or their complementaries, the diagonals. If large areas are covered, certain separation or aggregation of the elements, relieved or colored, into larger units is demanded, as otherwise absolute sameness would result, a condition abhorrent to the æsthetic sense. Such separation or aggregation is governed to a certain extent by the form of the utensil constructed, but it conforms in every case to the construction lines of the fabric, as any other arrangement would be unnatural and impossible of accomplishment. Textile decorative elements or units—vertical, horizontal and oblique lines, dots, and spaces—therefore, combine and must combine in continuous zones or rays.

Other arts possess in a lesser degree the same classes of mechanical elements, and their technique leads by similar methods to corresponding results.

All agencies originating with man that may be supposed of importance in this connection, the muscles of the hand and eye and the cell structure of the brain, together with all possible preconceived ideas of the beautiful, are, in primitive stages of art, all but impotent in the presence of technique, and, so far as forms and methods of expression go, submit completely to its requirements. Ideas of the beautiful, in linear geometic forms, are actually based upon and originate in the consideration of technical forms; hence the selection for their beauty of certain figures developed in art is but the choice between products that in their evolution gave taste its character and powers.

From the foregoing we see that art furnishes various mechanically derived elements or devices which combine from necessity in certain definite ways; that these devices and the suggestions they furnish are taken up and elaborated by the æsthetic sense. Through a consideration of all the known influences of mind and art we can determine the probable direction of this elaboration and the necessary character of the results, but it is impossible to show that any particular design of the highly constituted kind—the fret or the guilloche, for example—was derived through a certain identifiable series of progressive steps; for as in the evolution of natural forms—of species of animals and plants—the steps of progress are obliterated; and, furthermore, when we come to scrutinize the matter closely it is clear that any given design may have developed along more than one line and within the art of more than one race. The attempt to give more than a possible or probable genesis of a particular example of design must therefore be futile. Here, as in biotic evolution, we must be content to point out general tendencies and to discover general laws.

The second question, What part do delineations of life forms play in the development of set decorative designs? is now to be considered.

In a very early stage of culture most people manifest decided artistic tendencies, which are revealed in attempts to depict various devices, life forms and fancies, upon the skin or upon the surfaces of utensils, garments, or other objects. These figures are believed in cases to be of trivial nature, serving to amuse, but the weight of evidence tends to show that such work is generally serious and pertains to events or superstitions. The figures employed may in cases be purely conventional, but life forms afford the most natural and satisfactory means of recording, conveying, and symbolizing ideas, and hence predominate largely.

Figures having associated ideas of a superstitious nature come to be employed in all arts suited to their reception, and especially in those branches of art, such as basketry and pottery, extensively employed in superstitious offices.

Now, the fact has been noted and renoted that when natural forms are introduced into art certain modifications of form and character appear which are called conventions or conventionalisms. Such delineations vary from the most literal presentation of which the art and the artist are capable to forms so altered and abbreviated by the forces of convention that they are no longer readily recognized as of graphic origin. These phenomena are well known, and when a large number of examples are considered they may be arranged in a series extending from the most realistic forms at one end of the line to the most mechanical form at the other, the latter presenting to the uninitiated eye a meaningless device.

What is now needed is an analysis of the conditions and forces concerned in this remarkable morphology. Confining our observations to the embellishing phases of art, we find that three principal factors are concerned: First, the æsthetic desire in the mind of man; second, the technical forces and other mechanical agencies concerned in the practice or utilization of the art; third, the association of ideas.

1st. It is the æsthetic idea that calls forth the effort and presses forward to further and further elaborations of embellishment.

2d. It is clear that each art is endowed with its own special technique, and that figures acquired from nature must express themselves in terms of the several techniques. If the construction is geometric the figures must take on a geometric character; if plastic a plastic character, and if graphic a graphic character. Other related mechanical agencies in a like manner take part in determining the character of the results.

3d. Associated with each graphic motive, as I have already pointed out, there is an idea, as otherwise it would not in primitive stages have come into use at all. The expression of this idea may or may not be essential or desirable to the decorator, but as long as it remains essential or even desirable, the tendencies of the first and second forces towards conventionalism will be restricted or neutralized by this necessity of graphically expressing the idea. This tendency to resist conventionalism constitutes what may be called the conservative force in art. If the idea is strong all the tendencies of art to trim, restrict, or expand will be in vain. The idea dominates the technique. It is in this way that some national art characteristics originate.

Nations practicing arts having pronounced tenchnical characters, such as weaving and architecture, and possessing at the same time few or feeble ideographic elements, will develop a highly geometric conventional decoration, while nations practicing arts with less pronounced techniques, such as modeling, sculpture, and painting, and who make ideography a prominent feature, will have a system of decoration characterized by imperfectly defined conventionalism.

Now, what result follows the united and simultaneous action of all these forces upon natural forms? It is plain that on the whole the conventionalizing agencies are the stronger; that they are to a certain extent irresistible; hence as the ideographic or conservative feature becomes gradually weakened, as it usually does with time, they gain full dominance, and all forms then lend themselves with the utmost freedom to the enhancement of beauty under the dominance of the mechanical agents and the demands of the æsthetic sense.

A few examples will assist in making these statements clear. Let us take an illustration from the textile art of Peru—from a body of products belonging to one period and to a single community.

It may be assumed that fabric-making had long been practiced and highly perfected by the Incas, and that geometric ornament had been very extensively employed when the weaver first essayed, prompted perhaps by æsthetic but more probably by superstitious motives, to introduce the delineation of a bird into his fabric. We will suppose that he attempted an ordinary graphic delineation, but that owing to the difficulties—the restrictions of the technique of the art—the best he could do is shown in Fig. 1.

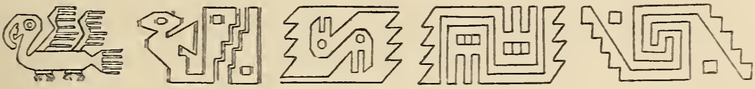
Fig. 1. Fig. 2. Fig. 3. Fig. 4. Fig. 5.

The bird in textile art transformed by technical forces.

But this degree of elaboration could not be maintained under all conditions of the practice of the art, and lines were simplified, parts omitted, and forms accommodated to the technique and to the geometric outlines of the original technical ornaments until they could easily be introduced into or substituted for them. The bird delineations were reduced to bird-like figures which could be carried serially along the zones to be decorated and with as much ease as could the purely geometric figures. Thus these bird figures merged into the elements or units of which current ornaments—meanders, frets, and scrolls—were made up, as shown in Figs. 4 and 5. It is plain also, whatever the life form introduced, that when the delineation became reduced to this wholly conventional condition it merged with equal ease into the frets and scrolls, becoming undistinguishable from its otherwise derived neighbors. There is no doubt that in time this introduction of nature-derived elements led to new forms and combinations and to great elaboration in purely conventional design. It may be noted also that the idea associated with the graphic bird may still be retained by the derivative geometric unit, and possibly it (the idea) may even finally extend to the whole line of units—to the current ornament.

In the plastic or the plasto-graphic arts conditions and processes are quite different from those of the geometric arts. Let us take one illustration of the introduction of a graphic design into vase-painting. Here the technical forces are neither so pronounced nor so rigid. With a free hand the decorator sketched in figures borrowed from mythological art and elaborated them according to his own idea of the demands of the subject and of the particular embellishment desired. But strangely enough we observe marked and peculiar conventionalisms some of which may be inherited or copied from the sister art basketry, but most of which are due to the inherent tendencies of the art. Let us examine briefly the nature of these. First. What effect has the shape of the vessel and the space at command to do with the form and character of the design? The spaces available for ornament are the neck, the shoulder, and the expanded portion of the body of the vessel. These form three encircling zones, separated by more or less abrupt changes in the profile of the vase. Now, any ordinary figure, as, for example, that of an alligator, introduced into one of these zones does not cover its whole extent, and a number of the figures must be introduced. This is readily done, but the narrowness of the zone tends decidedly to elongate each figure, and there is at the same time a marked, probably a habitual, tendency to unify the design by connecting the series of elongated figures in a linked or continuous line. It is not surprising, therefore, that such results follow as are traced in Figs. 6, 7, and 8.

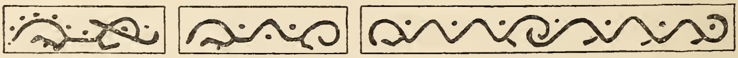

Fig. 6. Fig. 7. Fig. 8.

Alligator motive modified to suit varying spaces.

But again, if the spaces to be decorated are square or nearly so, as often happens, the result is very different, for the figure must be contracted and abbreviated in various ways to be included in the space, Fig. 9.

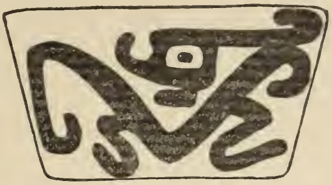

Fig. 9.

Alligator figure crowded into a sub-rectangular space.

And again, if the spaces are round or oval, distinct classes of results are reached, as is shown in Fig. 10. In such a case the figure, no matter what its nature, must be crowded or coiled up.

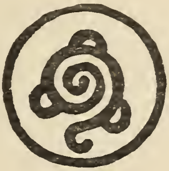

Fig. 10.

Reptilian figure modified by inclusion in a circle.

It will be observed that the free-hand method of presentation, even when there is no restriction as to space, results in conventions peculiar to itself. Instead of the sharply angular character seen in woven figures and to a considerable extent in engraved designs, rounded forms and flowing outlines appear; in place of the typical angular meander, guilloche, and fret, appear corresponding forms in curves—that is, the waved line, the twined or plaited lines, and the scroll.

In free-hand as well as in geometric introduction of life forms into ornament one of the most marked and constant tendencies is toward greater simplicity. This is due in part to the great difficulty of delineating the complex and subtile forms and partly to the necessity of extreme simplicity of elements that must accommodate themselves to eccentric spaces and to constant repetition in connecting series. Other cultures than those developed on American soil present kindred phenomena, though perhaps with less conciseness and clearness tell practically the same story of the natural history of conventional ornament.

A few of the salient points may now be briefly reviewed. It has been shown that in primitive stages of culture embellishment is practiced instinctively and in habitual ways and after habitual methods, and that it utilizes elements inherent in the art practiced, supplemented later by ideographic elements appropriate to that art. That as intelligence increases habitual or instinctive methods give way to more purely intellectual methods and ornament is abstractly treated ; elements are freely taken from their original and consistent associations and, under the supervision of what we call taste, utilized in all arts in which embellishment is a feature, and it appears that this use being guided by individual judgment is necessarily incongruous and imperfect.

Owing to the peculiar conditions under which the American tribes existed, their ornamental art, although abnormally developed, had not passed so far beyond this primitive instinctive stage as to confuse the evidence relating to initial steps.

In America are found all the important conventional designs which characterize the art of the old world, and the oriental scroll and the classic fret were more freely used by the simple barbarians of the lower Mississippi and of the great Colorado plateau than they ever were by the Greek or by the Assyrian.

It has been shown that all geometric designs may have developed, and probably did develop, within the arts and from elements inherent in these arts; that this occurred through the æsthetic desire of the mind dominated by the mechanical forces of the arts, and that in this country the textile and the fictile arts are most deeply concerned in this evolution.

It is seen that as art progressed animate forms were gradually introduced into decoration, not because of their capacity to beautify, but on account of ideographic appropriateness; that these life forms, when once within the realm of decoration, were acted upon by the mechanical forces of art and gradually reduced to purely geometric shapes; that each one of these figures has in all probability a complex genesis, since almost identical forms may have been evolved by independent nations through any one or through many of the arts, or that any creature extensively portrayed in any art of any people may, through the mechanical conventions to which it was necessarily subjected, be transformed by imperceptible steps into any one or into all of the typical geometic designs; and it may be added that, so far as ideography and symbolism are concerned, it appears from the above statement that *ideas associated with any one of our conventional decorative forms may be as diverse as are the arts, the peoples, and the original elements concerned in its evolution.*